Rishi Aurva and his VadavAgni

We come across an interesting story in the Adi Parva of the Mahabharata. The Brighus are Brahmanas endowed with Vedic knowledge. Kritavirya, a Kshatriya king, is a disciple of the Brighus. He performs a Soma Yagna with the help of several Brighus. He then gives them gifts with extreme generosity.

Several generations later, Kritavirya's descendants run out of wealth. The Kshatriyas feel that the Brighus are enjoying the wealth of their ancestors when they see them leading a lavish lifestyle. They ask the Brighus to share their wealth with them. But the Brighus bury their wealth and refuse to share it with the Kshatriyas. This infuriates the Kshatriyas. They think that the Brighus are denying them something that is rightfully theirs. So they start slaughtering the Brighus for their ingratitude.

The Brighus plead for mercy. But this only fuels their wrath. The Kshatriyas range the entire world hell-bent on exterminating the entire race of Brighus. So they slaughter the pregnant wives of the Brighus too. The women flee for their lives and hide in the mountain ranges of the Himavat.

Arushi knows that the Kshatriyas had probably killed her husband, Rishi Chyavana too mercilessly. She has been nurturing a child in her womb for the past 100 years. Arushi knows her child is blessed with the knowledge of all the four Vedas and that he will emerge from her body at the right time. So she does her best to hide and keep her pregnancy a secret.

But when the Kshatriyas find her they raise their swords to decapitate her. That is when Arushi's child rips through her thigh and appears amid a dazzling light in front of the Kshatriyas. This light is as bright as a thousand suns and instantly blinds all the Kshatriyas. Since this child is born out of Arushi's thigh ("Uru" means thigh in Sankrit) the child is named Rishi Aurva.

The Kshatriyas beg Rishi Aurva for forgiveness. Rishi Aurva restores their eyesight but tells them that he will put an end to the entire world soon. He undertakes the most austere of penances to liberate the souls of his ancestors who died such a macabre death at the hands of the Kshatriyas. The fire of Tapasya builds up within him as he performs the penance. This fire has the potential of destroying all the creatures that live upon Bhoomi, Swarga and Patala.

When Rishi Aurva's ancestors, his Pitrs, come to know about his intentions they appear before him and say, "O Rishi Aurva, you have the knowledge of all the four Vedas within you. You have the immense power of Tapasya too within you. Yet you want to put an end to all the creatures of the world. Why?"

Rishi Aurva says, "O Pitrs, I have heard the doleful cries of my father, mother and all the other Brighus when the Kshatriyas were slaughtering them. They cried plaintively out of sheer terror when the Kshatriyas ill-treated them. But no one – not even a single creature forward to protect them.

If people who are in power indulge in such atrocious deeds how will the weak survive? Other kings and creatures too witnessed these crimes. But instead of doing their duty and protecting the weak, they turned a blind eye towards such atrocities. Such creatures do not deserve to live.

The fire of my Tapasya burns within me. I intend to use my powers to teach them all a lesson. Only then will the powerful people learn to do their duty and take care of the weak instead of taking undue advantage of them. Tell me, O Pitrs, what is wrong with my intentions?"

The Pitrs say, "O Aurva, restrain your wrath. You feel the Kshatriyas massacred us to retrieve the wealth of their ancestors from us. But your perception is flawed.

We, your ancestors are Brighus. We were quite capable of protecting ourselves from the murderous rage of the Kshatriyas. But we deliberately

did not do so. In fact, we were weary of living through our long lives embroiled in samsara. The Kshatriyas were mere instruments, Nimits, who fulfilled our wishes. We had decided to bury our wealth under the earth to stoke their anger for we were desperate to get moksha. And tell us, O Aurva, of what use is wealth to Brighus like us who have renounced everything in life.

And you O Aurva are repeating the mistake of the Kshatriyas. Aren't you about to misuse the powers you gained through your Tapasya to pacify your own anger? Anger has clouded your thoughts too. How can you punish other creatures for no fault of theirs? These creatures are not even aware of what their ancestors had done in the past. And who are you to punish them? You say you want to punish them to liberate our souls. But we, your Pitrs have attained that state of bliss already. So unleash your anger into the waters of the ocean now – for only Varuna can hold the fire of your wrath."

Rishi Aurva realizes the wisdom of his ancestors' words. So he decides to cast the fire of his wrath, his VadavAgni, into the abode of Varuna. When Ganga, Yamuna, Sindhu and the other rivers hear the exchange between Rishi Aurva and his Pitrs, they look at Vishnu and say, "Who will carry this fiery VadavAgni and cast it into the ocean? Vishnu says, "Only Saraswati can."

Saraswati looks in alarm at her father Brahma. Brahma agrees with Vishnu and says, "Saraswati, you alone can carry this terrible VadavaAgni and free all the creatures in the cosmos of their fears for no one else can match your purity. But I understand your fears O daughter. Flow eastwards with this horrendous VadavaAgni and cast it into the salty sea for this marks the beginning of the Kali Yuga.

I know you abhor people cleansing their sins in your waters. So use the force of your waters and plunge directly into the Patala Loka. And whenever you tire of carrying this gigantic VadavaAgni or get scorched by

its Agni, just emerge out of Patala, reveal yourself and flow on Bhuloka. I will create several teertha sthalas along your course to refresh you.”

So Saraswati carries the VadavAgni and flows down from Himavan through a Plaksha(Fig) tree towards the ocean at Prabhas. As Saraswati approaches the ocean, the VadavaAgni is surprised to see the high tides in the ocean. So he asks Saraswati, “Is Varuna scared of my fury? Saraswati says, “Who will not be scared of the wrath of a VadavAgni that is as all-consuming as you are?" This pleases the VadavAgni a lot. So he grants Saraswati a boon.

Saraswati takes Vishnu’s advice and says, “O Vadavagni, reduce your size so that it can pass through the eye of a needle and keep sucking the ocean.”The VadavAgni does so instantly after which Saraswati casts it into the ocean.

It is believed that this Vadavagni transformed into a horse-faced VadavaMukha and lies under the ocean even today. This VadavaMukha creates mists and clouds, prevents the sea from overflowing onto the land and creates tidal currents whenever it inhales and exhales. Some say that this Vadavagni will erupt through a huge volcano from under the sea and engulf the entire world during Pralaya.

It’s sad. But so very true. That like rishi Aurva, when we get carried away by our anger, the first thing we want to do is to “teach others a lesson.” Only to realize (if we are willing to introspect) that our perceptions are flawed. And the worst part of the whole thing is that other innocent people (like Saraswati and Varuna) end up paying the price for our rage…which, in turn, ruins the precious relationships that we share with them and others too.